

## **Episode 28: Come together.**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-eight: Come Together.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** Cassian and I wandered down into the market, ducking among fire jugglers, street musicians, more bards, bands, all sorts. Vendors hawked their wares, calling out to the people milling through the streets in Rhysean, the words lost among the muddle for me, but their carts and tables and tents, half-full of creations I didn't have words for, were suitable enough.

We didn't disguise ourselves, didn't put on hoods or change into more common clothing. I wore my midas shirt and stomping boots and had my sword at my side; Cassian was a princeling through and through, chin high and shoulder knocking into mine

every few steps, the sort of soft smile on his face that made my chest ache.

Rex, came the calls, from the vendors, from the poets. *Rex et soldat, soldat, vatakina eligida.*

Twilight faded in above us. We stopped to watch a play in the street, a troupe of actors set up on a temporary stage. I struggled through translations as the actors bounced their lines around, iambs like thumping hearts, like patter songs, running through them. The crowd grew and thinned and grew again, but we stayed, and laughed, and tossed coins to the actors with the rest of the gathered when they took their bows.

Rex, one of them said, *eligida*. They crowded the edge of the stage, and Cassian took the hands of the girl at the front, her eyes done up in green and gold.

*Gratinoc*, he said, and pressed his forehead to the back of her hands. *Gratinoc*.

It was this Cassian I loved. Soft, eyes filled with delight.

It was as we turned to go that I saw Rhia, a glimpse, an idea, at the edge of the gathered crowd. It was as our eyes locked that the girl from the Eligidanim Traem, from the party -- Rhia's lover, or Rhia's friend, the one Cassian told the soldiers to never let back into the castle -- shouldered her way

to Rhia's side and put a hand around her waist, unaware of how still Rhia had gone.

Cassian followed my gaze, and his darkened. He broke through the crowd like the prince he could be, no shoving, just movement, intentional and solid, as other people had the sense to get out of his way. My heart stuttering, I scrambled after him, dogging his steps as the blood drained from Rhia's face.

The girl caught sight of us. She did not flinch away, but put a step between Rhia and herself before dropping into a low, sarcastic bow.

*My sovereigns*, she drawled, the words an odd fit in her mouth, and as she stood, her eyes raked over the two of us -- not missing the anxiety I'm sure had flushed my cheeks, the anger that had turned Cassian's the same.

Cassian's eyes met the girl's, electricity crackling between them. She still did not flinch. Neither did Cassian. They were mirrors of each other, shoulders squared and chins raised and mouths quirked like any second they might bare their teeth.

I darted in front of Cassian the same moment Rhia slid in front of the girl, her the only one of the two of us tall enough to break their gaze. I didn't know what my plan was besides *stop this festival from becoming a war*, but Cassian sidestepped me.

The girl smirked. She did not take her hands from Rhia's waist, and that was when Cassian's eyes slid down to where they rested.

If it was possible for Rhia to look any more afraid, it was then.

*Rhia*, Cassian said, his voice short. There was a slight measure of politeness to it, a bit of prince, a bit of king that survived this girl. *Who is this?*

*Who is this*, of course, meant *do you know who this is*. He said it in English -- a conversation for the three of us and no one else. It hit me, for just a second, what life could've been if our paths had intertwined a little differently, if Cassian and Rhia and I had grown into a group of three, against the world together. Instead, there were three different histories: Rhia and Cassian, a childhood long past that I hardly knew. Rhia and I -- nights and starlight and stories-for-words and kindred spirits. And Cassian and I -- a future of greatness and a past-and-present of blood and swords and something else, k-words and camaraderie. Like the cover of the *Falsettos* playbill -- *this is how we connect, but not quite all together*.

*This is...* Rhia stuttered. *Cassian, this is...*

She turned to the girl, pulling her hands from her waist. She murmured to her in Rhysean. The girl stepped around Rhia. *Iolo*, she said. *Hello, my sovereigns*.

Cassian pursed his lips. In Rhysean, he said, *You were banned from the palace.*

*This is not the palace,* Iolo retorted.

*She is of the palace,* Cassian said, nodding to Rhia.

*She belongs to herself,* Iolo said.

Rhia winced. Cassian said, slowly, *she has a role to fill, like all of us. What is your role, Iolo from Around?*

Iolo smirked and said nothing. Rhia whispered something to her, fast and low, hardly pricking my hearing. Iolo said something back, her lips drawn up in a snarl. Her eyes flashed towards Cassian -- and then she laughed.

*To provide entertainment to those who seek it, King. I'd be happy to provide you with the same, given a dark room and enough silver.*

Cassian flushed, flinching backwards. *That's -- I --*

Rhia was a rebel, part of the Fretim, and even though I hadn't known for certain at the time, I would've bet my sword that Iolo was, too. Rhia's lover, Rhia's partner in... rebellion. Crime. But Iolo had guessed right, the thing that would make Cassian fold his hand and break his focus. Maybe Rhia had told her. Maybe Rhia had known.

*Yes, King?* The girl purred.

*Rhia --* Cassian said. *We'll talk later. Please.*

Rhia nodded, still pale, and Cassian whirled away. I stood, staring at the two of them for a breath, two, before Iolo said, in slow Rhysean -- *who do you stand with, Eligida?*

I checked over my shoulder -- Cassian was disappearing into the crowd. *Rhia*, I whispered. *I stand with Rhia.*

Iolo cackled. *Then stay, Eligida. Come with us.*

*Iolo* -- Rhia protested, and the girl shot her a look. I froze.

*I -- I --*

*Ilyaas, you don't have to do that*, Rhia said, in English, and repeated herself in Rhyean as Iolo started. *Your time. Your choices.*

I panicked, shot another glance over at where Cassian had vanished. *I can't -- not yet. I need to find Cassian.*

Rhia repeated my words back to the other girl, and she bared her teeth. *Fine, then. Go find your king, aestas.*

Another word that's hard to explain. It means -- puppet, I guess. Malleable. A conduit of someone else's will. I hadn't known it then, but had assumed it was an insult.

I mouthed *sorry* to Rhia. And I went to go find Cassian.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Ko-Fi at [ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast](https://ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast), where if you leave a topic in your donation box, I'll write you a ridiculous little lymerick to read out at the end of the show! If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://freemusicarchive.org). Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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